

**Phd Thesis**

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**'Environmental Values and the Ecological Crisis:**

*A Drama-logue'*

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## Prologue

When asked about the subject of my thesis, I usually lie. Explaining that I am attempting a philosophical inquiry into environmental values at a period when, at best, we face unprecedented ecological challenges, and at a very conceivable worst, civilisational collapse, does not readily lend itself to a comfortable social occasion.

Instead, I usually make some sort of apology, and explain that my interests are Greek in origin and concern themselves with the study of wisdom updated to include ecological wisdom. This is true, but misleading, for it suggests a coolly academic exercise, rather than an engaged, even impassioned, attempt at facing up to what we have to face up to, if we are to have a future of comfortable social occasions ...

Always better, it seems so often, to avoid the disagreeableness of speaking of the urgency of our rapidly depleting resources or the devastation of climate change. Better to remain quiet, so that conversation can lapse back into more mundane and unimportant levels, like the price of petrol, or the weather ...

The truth is that what I'm engaged in is right there in front of everybody, it affects all of us and no matter how politely we try not to speak about it, or remove it from our conscious minds, it is not about to disappear.

It is there screaming at us on our television screens, blasting images of the latest flooding, bushfires, hurricanes or wars fought over increasingly scarce resources. The images are there but where the analysis? Where is the thorough investigation into uncovering the facts of these new patterns of ecological devastation? And where do we find an attempt to discuss solutions to the increasing chaos?

If there is little analysis or integrity in the mass media, how much less it is so in our political leaders – some of whom are on record as denying what 98% of climate scientists are agreed upon – the reality of anthropogenic climate change and the devastating ecological impact this promises and has already begun to deliver.

It is at times like these we like to think we can turn to our public intellectuals for guidance, but, all too often, what we get instead is partisanship.

Consider those who profess their allegiance to the school of deep ecology. Do we not witness a reluctance, by some even an aloof commitment, not to engage with those they consider 'shallow'? Is this situation helped by the fact that many who align themselves with the humanistic tradition, like Murry Bookchin, devote their energies into wholesale assault upon the deep ecology movement, dismissing it as 'eco-fascism', rather than exercising the principle of charity and listening to their deeply felt concerns?

Is it not likewise the case that ecologically mindful Marxists, in turn, frequently ignore these other voices as a false consciousness that must be overcome in the war against capitalism? Or what about those economists who are 'ecologically minded' in so far as they recognize the enormous economic cost of ecological disaster? Are they listening to those who maintain that we require fundamental change to our institutions if we are to make the necessary shift to our changed circumstances? Or to those who claim we need a paradigm shift in our consciousness if we are to live peaceful, healthy and meaningful lives within biospheric limits, mindful of the wellbeing of human and nonhumans alike?

It is as if the sheer immensity of our problems and challenges have overwhelmed us, so that we are locking ourselves away, in a fitful desperation, clinging to whatever ideology provides us some comfort against the onslaughts with which we are faced. Is it thus not surprising that many have chosen to deny the reality of the ecological crisis altogether?

And have not too many environmental thinkers – especially those in academic institutions - contributed to this culture of denial by reducing intellectual inquiry to little more than abstract parlour games for the empowered elite, involving trivial point scoring over abstruse ideas with little contact with reality?

Are not, all of us, desirous of a proper reasoned investigation into the ecological threat and a genuine discussion into what demands this danger imposes on us? - a *process*, that opens our minds, hearts, or at the least, our ears to other points of view and strives towards a cooperative approach that unites us,

as human beings, towards a common threat? A threat, without exaggeration, that is the greatest with which our species has ever been presented?

We must remind ourselves – *this is a human problem and one that involves the whole of our humanity*. We are not dealing with a mere abstract puzzle that can be represented or answered by dry intellectualizing.

Our ecological problems draw out all aspects of our humanity – including those we might wish to hide behind a facade of 'objectivity' or 'disinterested reason'. Such aspects as our capacity for denial, our confusion, our rage, and our prejudices. I suggest, a genuine human inquiry will not go far by attempting to hide from these aspects of ourselves, but nor will a cold objectivist analysis show proper respect for that which we should be championing as best in our humanity - our capacity for compassion, empathy, patience and humour.

A genuinely human response, I repeat, must be driven by our humanity. It will require a courage in engaging with the 'Other' – a warm blooded attempt to take seriously what other human beings are saying to us, but equally to listen to our own inner voices. To ignore these other voices, these other 'narratives', only reinforces the culture of denial.

We are not helped in such a task by the authoritarianism implicit in the standard narrative form.

The very policy of speaking in one voice leads us to expect a singular argument that triumphs in a final judgement over all its critiques. Such a formula does not lend itself towards a sensitive and charitable investigation into the literature, but rather towards authoritarian finality. Equally there is an emphasis on originality, which, while it rewards career minded academics, takes emphasis away from what should surely be our true objective – a thorough inquiry into the subject matter, with the aim of finding genuine solutions.

To take but one example, consider Val Plumwood's *Feminism & the Mastery of Nature* (1993).

Plumwood argues that the entire Western tradition is systematically discriminatory towards all that it

dualistically discriminates as 'Other'. Such an approach means that an effective working towards a consensus is all but impossible, so that even when she writes on Paul Taylor and Tom Regan, 'both have been significant, and indeed impressive,' (Plumwood 1993: 166) - her systematic analysis means both are to be rejected owing to their 'rationalist approach'. But such 'radical exclusion' of these authors from the ecological debate strikes me as neither just nor helpful.

Such an approach not only harms the spirit of the ecology movement (by running down just about every contribution ever made to the subject), it may also harm the individual her/himself.

Closing off dissenting voices, within and without, may result in bitterness, anger, repression, loneliness and unproductive frustration.

Such being the case, then, our quest is for an inclusive meaningful discussion, and one necessary for our own health as human beings.

And such an approach, I claim, does not readily lend itself to the standard essay form. It is for this reason, I suggest, some ecofeminists and postmodernists have sought multiple narrative over the singular, as means of greater inclusion and a richer understanding.

Furthermore, intellectual grandstanding, even if (especially if) cast in a dryly academic form tends inevitably to underplay the dramatic seriousness of our situation. In this thesis I attempt to redress this by taking an approach that hopefully does justice to the seriousness of the challenge, without sacrificing the clarity of thought essential to genuine inquiry.

What I offer instead is a discursive strategy best described as a *drama-logue* which attempts a melding of both the dramatic and reflective.

A dry academic approach undermines the reality of the situation to human lives. However, pure drama would fail for the opposite reason – there would be an overemphasis on personality and tension at the expense of proper analysis.

I have chosen, instead, a kind of dance between the two – an entanglement of both.

The advantages of a *drama-logue* lies in enabling different voices to speak for themselves, and at the same time, with reflexive implications, to speak to and with others.

The *drama-logue*, if successful, can potentially reveal a truth, a sincerity and a process of argument more appropriate to the seriousness of the situation, and with a greater human capacity than the standard essay.

An attempt at genuine debate is surely what we are after. Humanity as a whole is being affected by ecological collapse and we need informed inclusive discussions more than ever. As a period when disaster looms, hypocrisy is high and reason is lacking, such a situation is not dissimilar to the breakdown of Plato's beloved Athens. To deal with that breakdown, Plato made the dialogue form his own. He insisted that salvation, if it were to be obtained, would require an informed and reflective debate. Monologue is not enough to drive genuine action (Plato 1973: 136-242).

Our situation is not dissimilar ...

Like Plato we are seeking a *practical* solution to a potentially catastrophic challenge.

Bernard Williams pointed out that all truly practical questions, at the end of the line, come down to a radically, first personal perspective. No one can answer the question 'what should we do?' without first asking and answering the question 'what shall I do?'. Furthermore, no one can truly hold a position without testing it against a conversational exchange that involves other reflective and practical agents (Williams 1985).

To show proper consideration for the inherent public nature of the debate, I have made some effort at making my project as readable as possible.

The *drama-logue* format, moreover, challenges points of view. Something like this is achieved in Rudolph Bahro's *From Red to Green* (1984). The process of the interview means that Bahro is

continually challenged on his position, as well as at times, forced to clarify. Ideally this is what true journalism should involve – but in an age such as ours, where interviewers are too often “media personalities” and the interviewed show a reluctance to the point of evasion in answering questions, their positions go, for the most part, unchallenged.

In what follows I have attempted to understand, express and assess the concerns of the ecofeminist and postmodern movement, without, however, abandoning reason.

These concerns are best expressed by Freya Mathews in her attack on 'academic structures that reinforce the exclusionary or competitive paradigm' (Mathews 2008: 46). However much merit these ideas may have in themselves, the academics who espouse them, 'might remain self-serving, engaging in philosophy basically to seek professional advancement, gain funding or enhance their own reputations' (Mathews 2008: 46). It is her view that this undermines *morality* altogether and moreover is no basis for genuine ecological action. She instead calls for an approach that allows us 'to see and feel the world from the point of view of others' (Mathews 2008: 47).

Like a tango dancer, I may turn towards or away from the other, I may be attracted or irritated or confused by them; what I will never be, however, is indifferent. I will never see them as merely an externalised object, either to be treated inhumanely, as the immoral person treats others, or to be treated with in-principle deference, as the person acting merely from probity or moral principle treats them (Mathews 2008: 50).

This dance is very much what I have attempted here.

My *drama-logue* reflects a commitment to our humanity, including our rationality, presented as a conversation between three voices 'A', 'T' & 'M'.

### **A note on the *drama-logue* form**

I feel further explanation is needed on the *drama-logue* form. Strictly speaking it is not Socratic, or at least not in the manner of Plato's later dialogues. There is no elenchus as such. The intention is to be partly a philosophical dialogue in the traditional sense, and partly theatre – drawing out the dramatic elements of this intense situation. I find commonalities between my own form and Plato's earlier dialogues, as well as Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*. In Hume's dialogues, Philo, Cleanthes and Demea are all given proper scope to develop their positions. The reader is left with no final judgement and as such, is forced to come to their own conclusion. Compare this with Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Here the reader is left in no doubt as to the position of the author and the exercise of the dialogue form is devised purely as a means of leading the reader to adopt the position of the author. Plato's later dialogues tend also towards what is essentially a singular narrative and one that develops a specific position. There is nothing wrong with such an approach, of course, it is merely that my own dialogue has a different aim. I have attempted to embrace postmodernist and ecofeminist concerns for 'multiple narratives'. In any event, dialogues need not be determinate, there is no reason to suppose that writing in this form should end with a singular view that triumphs over all objections and other suggestions. This is not the case with Hume, nor with many of Plato's earlier dialogues.

One of the purposes of writing in a dialogue form is to open up issues and to approach them from different perspectives. My three characters all begin from very different positions and while at times obstinacy or frustration may get the better of them, overall there is a commitment to striving for truth and there is a move towards consensus. This does not mean, however, that all three end up in full agreement on every issue. If this was to be the case, then it would undermine the dialogue process altogether, along with a commitment to multiple narratives. What's more, it would be psychologically unrealistic. And this brings me to my next point. I have attempted to make these characters, as far as my ability to do so and the limitations of the academic scope allow, psychologically real and interesting. My attempt is to conduct a dialogue, or a discussion, among real characters with real personalities and ethical commitments. After all, this is a real issue that affects real human beings and what better way to bring out the hard reality of the situation than by attempting to engage real(istic) people.

I have said that the characters A, T & M do not reach full agreement, but equally it is true that they nonetheless reflect on their initial positions and frequently adapt their original positions in the light of objections raised and further reflections. That is to say, they are engaged in 'active learning', the kind of learning that takes shape in a vibrant, interactive and challenging environment – a live theatre of thought and learning. The *drama-logue* form likewise brings out an *ethical dimension* to the subject matter. These characters are not interested in merely cold, abstract ideas – they want real knowledge that will inform their lives. This means that they must have the moral courage to state their opposition, to defend their own positions and to listen and respond to others. Whatever their flaws, all three characters grow through this process. This process is an example of *ethics in action* – genuine debate, discussion and reflection carried out by living and sincere human beings. The nature of the eco-crisis is that we need this sincerity, courage and ethical commitment to the real, just as we need genuine debate and discussion amongst different *people's* positions with a striving towards consensus. I repeat, the eco-crisis is too pressing and too important to be relegated to dry and partisan academia.

The purpose of the *drama-logue* is to inspire the reader into educating themselves and developing an informed position. There are no simple answers in this complex debate, but answers, if they are to come, I believe, are more likely to come through real discussion where positions are advocated and defended in a manner of genuine intercourse and positions able to be altered owing to reflection and consideration of alternative views and wider study. I have attempted something which is meant to be read as a 'live' discussion, though admittedly there are potential problems with such an approach. To begin with, I must confess a certain bias. My thesis, if one is to call it that, is that Enlightenment ideals have been too readily dismissed in recent times and that the greatest attempt we have in confronting the eco-crisis lies in taking this tradition seriously, as does retaining a sense of moral justice. All three characters are led to such a position, to some degree, though perhaps the reason for such agreement has much to do with the character of M who has a capacity for argument and perhaps more learning than the others. Still I think there is enough consideration for criticism of this tradition and alternative views, to make the *drama-logue* something more than a sophisticated attempt to push an agenda. Which leads me to the second problem. Just as bias cannot be avoided, so too must be acknowledged that it is impossible to give due credence to *all* positions on this issue in an equitable manner. The philosophy of ecological values is a dense area and the sheer weight of the material available makes it

an impossibility to properly analyze all contributions. While it is probably acceptable to leave many authors out (owing to scope) – it is far less acceptable not to give a mentioned author the weight of consideration they deserve. Still I think this is a problem for the standard essayist also. A popular strategy is to group authors together as a 'school' either to attack them or to lend credence to the authors position. At times, for the sake of brevity, I have done something similar. However I am aware that such an approach simplifies the subtlety of argument and instead of merely adding names in parenthesis, have attempted, as best I can, to draw out the individuality of such positions. Another strategy is to focus on a select group of authors. Such an approach is most useful in terms of in-depth analysis. However it has the drawback of excluding many from the debate and becoming preoccupied with a single issue, potentially hazardous to the wider perspective. My own strategy has been to select authors from the *inclination* of the characters themselves. This is likewise fraught with dangers, especially the possibility that it lend itself towards whimsy, both in terms of who is selected and their method of treatment. My hope is that there are constraints on this whimsy, firstly by attempting to draw from many authors from many quarters, and secondly by forcing my characters to defend their chosen authors against the questions and concerns of the *others*.

The *drama-logue* form also gives rise to problems in the progression of the subject matter. Owing to commitments, reflection and further reading by the characters, nothing is ever finally decided. Discussion does not follow a linear progression and frequently there is a return to subjects owing to one or more of the characters dissatisfied with its treatment. I don't believe people give up easily on their ethical positions, nor do I believe that they should. One of the problems with the standard essayist form is that while it may give consideration to opposing views, it usually finalizes a position, while I maintain that genuine debate is more open-ended and free-flowing, continually subject to fresh considerations. Rarely is an issue silenced absolutely and why should it? A genuine commitment to a position necessarily means that those who hold it are not ready to let go of it at the first sign of opposition. There are many positions in the ecology movement which demand to be taken seriously, and it is my view that such positions can receive fresh consideration by situating them in the format I have attempted. By attempting to place such ideas in the mouths of realistic characters who engage with each other in meaningful dialogue, they can affect us in a much more direct and compelling manner. And such an approach is something I believe we are looking for. In spite of its obvious failings, live discussion held be real actors engaged in a genuine pursuit of knowledge *and* action

inspired by courage and the capacity to learn, surely must play a role in the debate, if by no other virtue than it is attempting *real* debate. This is surely something we are looking for. What we're not looking for is false or glib certainty.